PAUL KELLY:

I must say when I began to focus on this event last night and noticed that the heading was Australian Media Traditions and then I noticed that Mungo McCallum was going to be one of the panellists, the cold chill of terror began to go through me as to exactly where this session might lead, but fortunately we only had orange juice at lunchtime.

(a voice calls out 'wrong!' - possibly Mungo)

(collective laughter follows)

And that's the way it always was. At least I started with orange juice anyway. It's also a long way to come to manufacture consensus, because this is the heading for my talk, but I'm very happy to be here and honoured to be the keynote speaker at this conference. I certainly trust it's a successful and vibrant one of the next few days. Speaking for myself I'm getting very relaxed and it's probably just as well that I'm catching a plane back to Sydney this afternoon.

I guess for me, one of the big conundrums at the moment is how much newspapers reflect their age, reflect the current times, and how much they can in fact try and shape them, change them and influence them. Everything I have to say over the next twenty-five minutes or so, will be highly subjective and opinionated, none of which reflects any detailed research or scientific approach.

I seems to me in Australia at the moment we are undergoing a profoundly anti-intellectual period. Our universities are under great stress and bleeding badly, our debates to me seem bogged down in a dialogue of the deaf, about the Aboriginal apology, the GST, the Greenhouse effect and various other issues. The ABC is more seriously crippled than it's been for a very long period of time, if ever. I think there's a form of cultural war in the country about values in which there only seem to be losers. There seems to be an absence of new and fresh voices. The Howard/Beazley era to me, has dummed down our politics, I think we have an anti-intellectual government and an opposition too cautious to say what it believes let alone put forward any intellectual statement of it's philosophy or policies. The paradox of course, is that there are tremendous opportunities in the country and for the country and a lot of people are enjoying those opportunities, reaping the benefits in all sorts of ways. The 1990's may be our most successful economic decade of the twentieth century. There are signs that the cultural cringe is on the retreat some might even be prepared to declare it dead. Our outlook superficially seems to be more international and cosmopolitan than ever, and yet I think we are faltering. To me the old introspective, 'she'll be right' envy or retreat, is still in evidence. Our business bosses keep fowling up, check our BHP, HIH, OneTel, just to mention a few in recent times. Our politicians have forgotten how to lead. Our intellectual class, if Australia can be said to have such a thing, has dropped the ball. Our popular culture seems to be locked in a bizarre sense of pessimism and defeatism, and walking away from the issues of the mind.

Now I can understand a lot of this particularly once one flys north of Noosa. I was thinking when I was sitting out there a while ago that I should chuck in this speech, have a swim and a beer, stay a while and reminisce with about the good old days.

What does this sort of climate mean for quality newspapers? I've got a novel and I assume unfashionable view. I think papers should lead, and the requirement on them to lead is more important than ever these days and I think they should lead in two ways.

First, revive old fashioned, very good, clear sided reporting. Let's have some good old-fashioned reporting. Reporting of the sort done by Paul Toohey, The Australian's Darwin correspondent, who much to my delight received the Perkin Award a few months ago, for The Journalist of the Year. And the interesting thing about Paul Toohey's reporting on aboriginal affairs is that he hasn't been reporting about how the aborigines are bucketing John Howard , or how there are campaigning for the treaty, or how they're calling for an apology. He's actually been reporting from the grass roots, he's been reporting about what's going on in aboriginal communities, what's going on in aboriginal lives, what's going on in aboriginal society. This is the sort of reporting we need more of. We need more Paul Toohey's, we need a lot more of them, and we need to send these people out to the school system, to the welfare centres, to the housing estates, to tell the truth and abandon a lot of fashionable prejudices. We need fearless imperical reporting, not beatups, but reports about issues that affect people, and I think that if we get this sort of reporting I think it will challenge a lot of the orthodoxies. I think that this sort of honest reporting is one way we might attempt to resolve this cultural war that I referred to earlier on, and try to repair the gulf between the issues affecting so many Australians and the orthodoxies of the opinion makers.

I think the second thing we need from our quality newspapers is a more intellectual approach, a more rigorous approach. I think we need to be more resolute and unapologetic in saying that the task of our quality papers is to engage in a meeting of the minds. I think that if we, if we try to do this, circulation won't drop like a stone, I actually think it will increase. I think too much of the debate these days is newspapers are trading between interest groups. I mean, interest groups, it's important that interest groups get a say, and they get a bloody big say these days. And so, the parameters of the debate are defined by the various interest groups. While that's important, I think that there is something missing. And what's missing is a more intellectual, independent voice and perspective coming from the quality media. We do live in an age of slogans and gestures, a time when ideas are not at a premium and there are so many issues challenging the people and challenging the country, that we ought to be involved in whether its looking at how Australia seizes the opportunities in the globalized age, whether its looking at how we can achieve social justice in a market based economy, whether its looking at how we develop the whole concept of the knowledge economy, what it means, what it means for industry, for universities, society, school, people, for the working life.

I'd like to see the quality papers featuring new voices from the academy, featuring new spokesmen and spokeswomen from the universities and from the think tanks, and

younger journalists coming to the fore in a more aggressive way pushing the old fogies out the back door and into the bar or on to the beach.

I think we need to be more resolute about our international coverage, I think our coverage of international issues leaves quite a lot to be desired and I think we are out of touch with a lot of the thinking and debates that are going on in other parts of the world. I mean I travel a reasonable amount overseas and when ever I go somewhere after I've been there two or three days the first thing that occurs to me is well there are some very interesting things going on in this country and interesting debates but we are not actually aware of this back home.

I think we need to talk more about continuity, the stream of history and historical memory. One of the stories that surprised me not all that long ago was that I think the head of the RSL went to Japan and came back after some very important meetings in Japan and effectively announced that it was now safe to Australia to deal confidently with Japan. And I read this story and it was almost as though there was a thirty-year time warp. I think that to a certain extent we've forgotten a lot of the stories that we learnt ten, twenty, twenty-five years ago. There is no intellectual leadership coming from the political level and okay politicians are politicians, but frankly I think this is quite important because when one looks back a previous periods, and I don't think I'm being too romantic about this, I mean I appreciate that Prime Ministers have got to cajole, intimidate and glad-hand, but I do think that at earlier periods we have had leaders who are far more resolute in putting on the table a clear intellectual exposition of what they were doing, of why they were doing it, and what it meant. Whitlam did this, and he did it very, very effectively, Paul Keating did this in terms of what he termed story telling. It's a separate issue as to how effective and how successful these politicians were, but what I'm really talking about is their capacity to try and intellectualise what they were doing and I think that this is important for the community about making sense about what is happening.

I do think that we suffer at the moment from this conflict in our debate between what's called the three cheers and the black armband view of our history. To a certain extent it's a product of the Howard prime ministership, but it has been particularly intense this debilitating debate and conflict, this cultural war. It may well be that this is the debate that we had to have. I'm inclined think there's a certain degree of truth in that, but we really do need to liberate ourselves from this debate and we need to be able to move on and to be able to see public policy issues and look at our society beyond this particular paradigm. The battle if you like between the Howard and the anti-Howard forces, the battle between those people who see our history basically as a history of victims, whether you're talking about women or aborigines , or workers or the Irish or the Chinese or veterans or migrants, and those on the other hand however see our history as a glorious story of triumph from the Anzacs to the Bondi lifesavers to a whole generation of Bob Menzies driving FJ Holdens.

I want to say a few things in more detail about newspapers and how they are changing. This is my 30th year as a journalist and editor, so I guess that does qualify me for veteran

status and I am aware of the temptation to romanticise the past. To me however, our age and our industry is enormously influenced and some would say dominated these days by marketing, by business plans, by market research, by the so called scientific approach to journalism, by gee whiz high tech and of course by the bottom line. It's no surprise these are the dominant influences on our newspapers, our whole newspapers operation is far more elaborate and sophisticated than it was 30 years ago, looking back on it seems quite primitive. I went back to the papers of the early 70's to confirm that we were producing better newspapers today, and guess what, I think we are, but I don't think that's the issue. The issue to me is are quality papers in 2001 as relevant and challenging for their age, as the papers in the early 70's were in their own time and this is where I'm far more sceptical. I've got doubts about this. Certainly the journalists are different, they are smarter, better qualified, far more sensible it seems to me than what we were a generation or a couple of generations ago. Newspapers are more of a business, the editor is a manager, the newspaper is a product, the readers are consumers, the journalists are content providers. We now have human resource units in newspapers to assess performance. I was reading the other day a report from an American performance assessment. It put the reports on a virtual assembly line with productivity goals and I quote the good creed : " a reporter should spend 5.4 hours on a story, 20 t0 30 inches long and produce 7 such stories a week. For a more complex piece of reporting involving uncooperative sources the creed gave the reporter a break - 5 stories and 7.6 hours"

I was talking to a friend of mine from Fairfax the other day, and I was amazed to be told that they've now got quite programmed journalistic assessments being introduced at Fairfax, where a senior person is supposed to fill out a form assessing the performance of the journalist beneath them. This is quite extraordinary! My first news editor who taught me in my first month in journalism was a bloke called Hal Linsner, and he knew unquestionably when you got it right and when you got it wrong and told you so by shouting at you and I think that basically, that led to pretty fast progress up the learning curve. I guess my own prejudice as Editor in Chief of the paper was that I felt that I had a fairly good assessment of the journalists, artists and photographers on the staff I wanted to promote, and those I didn't, and I didn't have to fill out a piece of paper to sort it out. But it's the bureaucracy there is a new form of bureaucracy being introduced which is eating up a lot of, I think, financial resources. It's interesting I think, that to a certain extent journalists no longer talk about editorial independence that used to be the buzzword, the hot topic, today it's hardly mentioned. In the old days people were out in the streets demonstrating against Kerry Packer, there was debate about charters of editorial independence and it's true that this debate was set very much at Fairfax, but of course, one of the great ironies is that these days at Fairfax the editors in chief are also the publishers so the problem is defined out of existence. The manager or publisher or business executive against which the charter was devised now actually runs the paper. This is an extraordinary form of reverse take-over, it means that editors in chief are rewarded according to commercial performance not editorial performance and these editors in chief essentially spend about 90 or 95 % of their time on commercial issues not on editorial issues. Which takes me to another very big area, which is the commercialisation, the pervasive commercialisation of the industry and of paper. Now I mean, of course, there were always commercial imperatives, I recognise that, but it does

seems to that these imperatives are greater than what they have ever been before, that more and more editors are spending more and more of their time on commercial areas, that commercial values are stronger, the risk is that editorial values might be weaker. And of course, it's the age of the expert; we've got all sorts of experts now, the market research, the marketing expert, the financial expert, the human resources experts. One of the great dangers in this is that people don't have as much time for content as they used to before. We need to be very careful about the battle between content and finance and we need to be very careful about the changing values. If journalists are just content providers there are many consequences, if that's how we see journalists then there is really a question mark about the need for foreign correspondent. If it's just a question of content providers then perhaps the more efficient recourse is to take the foreign news service. If it's a just a question of content providers then what is the rational or need for separate Canberra bureaus in the one group.

I think that the way these issues are being seen and the way these values are changing is quite important.

Now a few areas to finish up. I want to make some comments about technology, which of course, is liberating for the journalist, but we should be aware that the story of technology is a complicated one, to quote one of my favourite writers on the media, Neil Postman : " To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral is to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture. At this late hour is plain stupid"

I think that when one looks back at the industry we've gone through two enormous revolutions in technology in the last 30 years, and I went through one as Editor in Chief. And the interesting thing about that for me was that what the accountants told us would be the impact of technology had absolutely nothing to do with the impact of technology. The impact is riddled with all sorts of unintended consequences and consequences which cannot be predicted, and of course, that's the story of technological change.

I think that one of the interesting results of this is a tremendous emphasis these days on design, design is king, how things look. We're very interested in looks as a society and certainly in newspapers and we're into all sorts of tricks; Photo enhancements , what you can do with colour, and of course, the web site. It is important to note the amount of money which has been lost by newspaper corporations in investments in the new technology and to a certain extent this is part of the process, when we get new technology there will be trial and error I think that's inevitable. Nonetheless, I think one has to have reservations about the astuteness with which newspaper corporations have tackled some of the issues of new technology and looked at the whole dot. Com experience and what the Internet revolution has meant for the newspaper industry. Now it is empowering and the Internet is a tremendous research device for journalists, I mean I'm very aware of that, but I also think it's been to a certain extent mesmerising and I think papers have had trouble maintaining their balance and staying on course in terms of absorbing the new technology. Technology is very time consuming; we're always tied up with meetings about the web site, about how to make money out of the technology, about the dot.com

experience, about new product. One of the interesting lines one of our senior executives delivered to me when I bumped into him not long after the share market corrections was, he said to me: "We've actually discovered we're still a newspaper corporation"

Another very important trend is the entertainment/ show business trend, I think this is quite pervasive these days within the industry, it helps to explain all sorts of things. The Pauline Hanson phenomenon cannot properly be grasped short of the media's search for the engaging personality, witch or heroine, perhaps either will do. Hanson's promotion by the media was both a newly discovered demon and a political personality, perhaps a variation upon the promotion of Bronwyn Bishop a few years earlier. When one looks at the coverage of politics I think it's true that Australian politicians can be great entertainers, all one's got to do is to listen to Gough Whitlam today, one presumes that his previous careers was as an entertainer and not as a politician. Television is blending politics with entertainment, its part of the popcorn culture, a great example of course, is Bill Clinton and oral sex. This is a story that owed just as much to the politician as entertainment culture permeating the media as it does to the bizarre system of the US democracy which some naïve politicians actually want to introduce into this country.

Many serious journalists rationalise the trivialisation of their own role with pomposity telling us that this story proves that Clinton is morally unfit to govern.

Another phenomenon in Australia is the increasing penetration of the media into the private lives of politicians. We've seen this in both Britain and America in recent times and certainly a few year ago in this country we saw it in the coverage of Cheryl Kernot. Particularly the Kernot sex story which was 22 or maybe 25 years old. The legacy of television is very strong here, but the point is not that television is entertaining, but that I think TV made entertainment the dominant format for the representation of life and I think television has had a profound impact in terms of the way in which the media and newspapers approach their task. There's a little grab that I like very much again from

Neil Postman talking about television news, he says: "We are urged by the newscasters to join them tomorrow what for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights." We accept the newscasters invitation because know that the news is not to taken seriously. That it's all in fun. Everything about the new show tells us this. The good looks, the outlook of the cast, the pleasant banter, the exciting music that open and closes the show, the vivid film footage and the attractive commercials. All these and more suggest that what we've just seen is no cause for weeping, a new show to put it plainly, is a format for entertainment, not for education, not for reflection. When one looks at sport, religion, business or politics these days, I think to a certain extent they are all shaped by the new entertainment culture. For a young person, who's the real President of the United States? Michael Douglas, Jeff Bridges, Bill Clinton, George Bush, or Martin Sheen.

Entertainment has many consequences particularly when it's put in harness with technology. Shorter stories, very much appeals to emotion, appeals to emotion not

appeals to the mind. The manufacturing of issues, synthetic rage. What is 60 Minutes or talkback radio all about? Very much about whipping up this culture of synthetic rage. That's not to say there's not a legitimate grievance, often there is a legitimate grievance, but it's exaggerated out of all proportion, the blame culture. The sense that no matter what happens in my life it's the fault of a politician somewhere. The idea that one's own life experience is of somehow of public relevance or significance. If one's kid is on drugs, or the boss made a pass at me or someone broke into my house, these matters once considered to be the complete private domain now have a degree of public significance. They need to be ventilated, the individual needs to be on radio, and it's quite important that such important issue be explored as examples of public policy in relation to sexual discrimination and the law and order debate.

The authentic politicians of the age Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, grasped the real nature of contemporary leadership, it's not about party, it's about projections. It's really a fusion of ancient Rome and modern Hollywood. A fusion of power and celebrity. It's about establishing an emotional bond with the community. People living a secular society short of heroes invest their hopes in celebrities from Princess Diana to Tony Blair to Bill Gates. A politician told me a few years ago in awe the story of a man who's wife had died the day before Princess Diana's own death, he'd confessed that he was more affected by Diana's death than the death of his own wife. Well, this might be a commentary on his wife, but its certainly a commentary on new, powerful and strange forces at work. There's I think, a factor here of petulance, petulance in the age of instant gratification. We live on a point and click society, point and click. If you feel like sex turn on the computer, point and click. It's a far more convenient way of living ones life. Point and click is the new cycle of life. This has all sorts of consequence for politics.

We live in extraordinary times in which the politicians actually know what the people think. When the political leaders talk to the people, they are not actually trying to find out what they think, they know what the people think, and that's actually dictated the language and approach of the politician. I think that it's very interesting when you listen to Kim Beazley because his most favourite phrase is "in touch". He uses the phrase "in touch" virtually every time he appears on television or radio. And the reason he uses it is because the market researchers have told him that the single major liability for John Howard is that he is not seen as being in touch with the Australian people, so Kim wants to reinforce the message.

We live very much in a phase of reactive politics. The extraordinary thing of course, is that there's not all that much difference between the government and the opposition, the differences are created, they are exaggerated, they're manufactured. We live in an age dominated by gesture; it's gesture politics. HIH collapses, what happens? There has to be a royal commission, the politician is required to make a gesture. The utility of the decision is another matter altogether. But it is gesture politics. Now I don't want to belittle the role of symbolism, symbolism can be important, but I think we are overdone on gesture. The decision by John Howard earlier this year the back down on petrol excise, the 1.5% petrol excise, I think, was an extraordinary decision because this was in it's purist form an irrational decision, it made no economic logic whatsoever. The loss of

revenue was enormous and it was done for one reason, to try and buy back public trust and to appease the sense of public rage. That's really the sort of condition that we've got ourselves into these days where Neil Mitchell in Melbourne appears as the modern St. Paul and the talk back radio merchants see themselves as actually representing and interpreting the voice of the people and are quite explicit about this evangelical role which they assign themselves. Elections are no longer designed to resolve issues, because democracy is about a permanent dialogue between the people and other politicians and there are some good aspects of the permanent dialogue but there are also some risky ones particularly when it comes to the voice of the people, what it is, who interprets it, who takes these decisions. It think another interesting feature of this debate of course, is how fickle public opinion is. For a fortnight the only issue that counts is Peter Reith's telecard and then it's dead, as dead as it could possibly be. I think there's a degree, increasing degree of irrationality getting into the public debate, the politicians regurgitate what the people what to hear in precisely the same words and language that people have used to describe their own emotions and their own sentiments, but there's a paradox, when the politicians regurgitate the people's sentiments the people aren't happy. The public is cynical, dissatisfied and restless, it complains all the time about the politicians and the political system, it doesn't like what's happening, it doesn't like the leadership, it doesn't like politicians or the president or the prime minister merely regurgitating to the people what they think and the reason is because the people at base level want more. They don't just want their own prejudices recycled to them by the leadership; they actually want the leaders to add value. But a focus group will never tell you that, the focus group will never tell the political leader and it will never tell the newspaper editor.

I think in terms of a lot of these trends I've talked about in the industry, the bottom line to reiterate as far as I'm concerned is we need to put a premium on two things, good old fashioned political reporting, a revival of it in a tough-minded and authentic fashion and a more intellectual approach from our quality newspapers. Let's not be apologetic about it let's try and engage other papers in confronting the big issues which I think people want to see debated.

Thank you very much.